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SUBJECT: SURKOV GIVES GREEN LIGHT TO CENTER-RIGHT PARTY

Classified By: Acting POL M/C Colin Cleary for reason 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) At a closed door convention July 31, Presidential Administration Deputy Head Vladislav Surkov reportedly gave the Kremlin's blessing to Mikhail Barshchevskiy's pro-business and economic reform-oriented Civic Force (CF) party's efforts to cross the seven percent threshold and be represented in the Duma following the December parliamentary elections. Surkov's support has only reinforced the view that CF is a Kremlin tool designed to potentially foil the prospects of Duma-bound "liberal" party. Following Surkov's endorsement, a CF representative told us that the party expects to receive no help, but also no interference, from the Kremlin as it campaigns in the fall. End summary.

Surkov Endorses Party

¶2. (C) On July 31, Mikhail Barshchevskiy's center-right Civic Force (CF) party staged a convention in Moscow as part of its increasingly strenuous attempts to make voters aware of its party platform and its efforts to cross the seven-percent threshold to representation in the Duma in the December elections. CF's efforts on July 31 were aided by the presence of Presidential Administration Deputy Head Vladislav Surkov, who spoke behind closed doors to the estimated 350 delegates present. CF Press Spokesman Aleksandr Agamov told us August 2 that CF Chairman Barshchevskiy had long been angling for an appearance by Surkov. Agamov confirmed press reports that Surkov in his speech had given the green light to CF. The tacit agreement, Agamov thought, meant that the Kremlin would neither actively help nor hinder CF's efforts to get on the scoreboard in the Duma elections.

¶3. (C) Agamov also confirmed that Surkov had sketched in his speech a place for CF on the right-center part of the political spectrum. Surkov's remarks suggested Kremlin discomfort with the continued perceived leftward drift of the electorate and of parties such as the Communists and Just Russia that are pursuing them.

¶4. (C) Per Agamov, in addition to the delegates, the CF convention was attended by about one hundred businessmen from the regions. CF hoped that they would understand Surkov's presence as a sign that they could contribute to CF's campaign without retribution from the Kremlin. Agamov hoped that media reports would trickle out to Russia's governors and mayors, as well. Agamov worried that, Surkov's remarks notwithstanding, most governors were too closely tied to the pro-Kremlin United Russia party to allow CF's campaign to go forward unhindered.

CF's Electorate

15. (C) In the wake of Surkov's endorsement, Agamov thought that CF's task was to energize its core voters, whom he identified as "the intelligentsia, small and medium entrepreneurs, and others who are alienated from the political process." In an earlier interview, Barshchevskiy described CF as the party of "the professional elite."

16. (C) CF, said Agamov, had not yet decided on the shape of its 80 - 110 required districts. Once that was done, then local CF conferences would compose local party lists, which would be discussed and finalized at a national party conference to be held September 15 - 20. In separate interviews, Barshchevskiy has predicted that the party could win 20 - 25 percent of the vote, "if (CF's message) is heard."

17. (C) Other than the brief media flurry generated by Surkov's appearance at the convention, publicity for the CF has been limited to political ads above some of Moscow's central boulevards, and Barshchevskiy's occasional appearances on television. The party's other efforts to generate publicity have been underwhelming. Embassy visited a July 30 CF-organized rally in central Moscow entitled "You Must Decide Whom You Support; the Right Wing or Someone Else." The rally was attended by about fifty student-age protesters who knew nothing of the party and told Emboff they had been paid to take part.

Financial Barriers

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18. (C) Although CF had recently moved its headquarters to a new building much closer to the city center where its staff occupies four floors, Agamov was clearly worried about the party's lack of financial resources. He stressed several times the expense of the fall campaign, and noted that CF had no parastatal backer like United Russia's Gazprom or SPS's RAO UES.

19. (C) Agamov said that CF expected no difficulties, other than financial, in gaining television air time. Barshchevskiy is well known in his capacity as government representative to the Constitutional Court, and he is telegenic. Agamov noted that the July 31 CF conference was covered by the press and featured on most of the national networks, as have been many of CF's election-year initiatives. Barshchevskiy and his party have generally confined themselves to mild criticism of the GOR. Barshchevskiy has pegged the lack of democracy in Russia to "the lack of an economic basis for democracy," but has criticized the Kremlin's decision to have governors appointed instead of elected, and has argued that it was "unwise" for the GOR to have prevented Other Russia from staging its marches of dissent.

Comment

110. (C) The green light from Surkov only reinforces the belief that CF is a "Kremlin project" that will be used, if necessary, to undercut its increasingly populist rival, the Union of Right Forces (SPS). In the absence of active Kremlin support, CF will face the task of overcoming regional resistance or indifference to its efforts and of attracting enough money to run a national campaign. CF has never electioneered before (it sat out the March regional contest), and it seems unlikely that the members of the intelligentsia and entrepreneurs, whom it describes as its core electorate, are numerous and active enough to propel it into the Duma.

All signs are that, if left to its own devices, CF will squabble with Yabloko and other minor parties for the handful of votes that comprise Russia's diminished center-right segment of the political spectrum.

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